

I Love My Librarian!

2010 Award

Nomination for Laura Farwell Blake

Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Nominator

Christine Barrett
Somerville, Massachusetts

1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award. What sets him/her apart?

Laura Farwell Blake is, without qualification, the most intellectually, professionally, and personally generous woman I have ever met. As a librarian she is nothing short of inspiring, investing extraordinary amounts of time and energy in helping faculty and students execute their teaching and research programs. As the English department's liaison librarian, Laura possesses an uncanny knowledge of the field and methodologies of research within it; that knowledge is matched only by her warmth and dedication to each affiliate. Graduate students think of Laura as a profound resource, like a kind of biblio-oracle, though much less terrifying than the Delphic variety.

2. Please discuss how the nominee has helped you and/or others and made your experience of the library a more positive one. For instance, did the nominee assist you in a research project or enhance your students' learning experience?

As a graduate student, I have benefitted from Laura's insight and assistance in two ways: she has helped me both in my capacity as an instructor for undergraduate courses, and in my role as a doctoral candidate working on a dissertation.

As a teaching fellow or course head, the first thing I do to prepare for a class is to meet with Laura to discuss the pedagogical goals of the course, and how best to leverage the resources of Harvard's library system to the benefit of my students. In addition to being the Harvard College Library's liaison librarian to the English department, Laura is also Head of Services for Academic Programs; she is committed to integrating the libraries with the teaching mission of the university, and consults regularly with grad students and faculty about how to develop courses which incorporate Harvard's unparalleled libraries into the daily experience of their students.

In the summer and fall of 2007, for example, Laura helped me and the rest of the teaching staff build the elaborate online environment for an experimental course led by Professor Stephen Greenblatt, Humanities 27: Travel and Transformation in the Seventeenth Century, a Silk Road Course. The class, which was covered by the Chronicle of Higher Education, was radically interdisciplinary, seeking to provide students with a synchronic view of the world in the 1630s. The range of material was extraordinarily broad, but Laura's vision helped us build a course website and modules which were easily navigable by the students, and which helped constellate topics as diverse as South American flora and fauna, Barbary pirates, and the Globe Theater, in a clear and coherent way. Working with her indefatigable colleague Cheryl LaGuardia, Laura created a library resource guide for the course, which was designed to be a springboard for students interested in pursuing any of the strands of the course, even and especially across disciplinary boundaries. In short, Laura's partnership was an enormous part of the pedagogical success of the course.

Laura has been deeply helpful in my own research. My dissertation focuses on the intersection of maps and literature in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England. When I began working on the project, I found myself needing to acquaint myself very quickly not just with multiple disciplinary approaches to literature and artifacts such as maps and globes, but also with the ways of handling and reading those artifacts. I asked Laura if she had suggestions for how I might go about building my disciplinary and material literacy. Within, literally, minutes, she had put me in touch with an expert in Harvard's Map Collection and with the Fine Arts Library's resident expert on topics related to my own. Minutes after I left to meet with these individuals, Laura also sent me a tailored list of electronic resources I might look into, and which, it turns out, proved extraordinarily helpful.

This is just one example of Laura's almost preternatural ability to instantly and perfectly assess one's information needs and deliver a precisely-matched set of solutions. She is famous among grad students in my department for doing this on a regular basis, and with total nonchalance. One of my colleagues, Shari, had called Laura couple years ago. Shari had been at a loss, trying unsuccessfully to determine which of Shakespeare's plays had been the most frequently performed in 1603. On the phone, Shari explained her situation, and asked Laura if she knew of any way she might be able to get this info. "Why don't you come to my office, and we'll figure it out?" Laura said. When Shari arrived at Laura's door ten minutes later, Laura was holding a slip of paper with the play's name and the number of performances on it. Shari's jaw dropped. "Now let me show you how I did this," Laura said.

3. How does the nominee make the college, community college, or university a better place?

Beyond being a legendary font of research assistance, Laura is also famously invested in the project and work of each grad student in the department. Not only will she drop everything to help a grad student struggling to find a resource, text, item, or fact, Laura also knows the field, interests, and dissertation topic of each of the 80-some grad students in English. She is routinely described to prospective graduate students as being the Number One reason to attend Harvard for an English PhD—beating out a library system with 15 million volumes, an almost ridiculously famous faculty, all the name recognition of Harvard, a generous financial aid package, and, of course, the chance to walk the campus of "Love Story."

Laura is a fixture at departmental events, and she brings a degree of enthusiasm for learning, passion for scholarship, and welcome to the libraries neither I nor any of my colleagues has seen at other institutions. Laura leads tours for new and prospective grad students, introducing them to a library system which is vast and deep; with as many as 104 libraries, the Harvard library network could be intimidating—nay, terrifying!—to new students. But Laura’s guidance makes the libraries instantly legible and singularly navigable. Her genuine excitement about matching students with techniques of learning and modes of research is both inspiring to watch and thrilling to participate in.

Laura has also used her leadership skills and position to build and drive a culture of collegiality and congeniality within the library and in partnership with departments. Grad students and librarians mix often and freely, because of events and gatherings—both social and academic—which Laura convenes. Because she makes it a point to meet every new undergraduate, graduate student, and faculty member, Laura is uniquely positioned to make connections between English department affiliates, librarians, and affiliates of other departments.

And because Laura is so committed to the effective and efficacious use of instructional technology, she is able to jumpstart and steer projects with lasting contributions to the campus community. Two years ago, for example, we celebrated the launch of Poetry@Harvard, a publically-accessible site featuring guides to and explorations of the poetry teaching, reading, and writing, resources at the university. Laura had shepherded the project to its launch, coordinating a team of countless contributors and partners for years. The result is an extraordinarily generous and helpful site for lovers and teachers of poetry on and beyond the campus.

4. How has the library, and the nominee in particular, had an impact on students and faculty and the teaching and learning process?

Laura has a knack for turning courses into success stories. She partners often with faculty and grad students to develop class assignments which bring students into the libraries (both digitally and physically). For a tutorial course I taught last year, “Renaissance B-Sides: The Greatest Hits You Never Heard of by the Authors You Thought You Knew,” Laura met with me and my students to discuss ways of approaching the idea of the author and the idea of canon in their research. While introducing students to key resources—including Early English Books Online, the introduction to which one of my students described as being like “a minor religious experience”—Laura also brought into focus for them the ways in which concepts we’d been discussing can bear out in very real choices they make in their research. Laura had also helped me design assignments for the students which would bring them into contact with the library’s special collections and diverse materials. The result was a course deeply integrated with the libraries, and in which the undergraduates deepened their connection to and comfort in navigating the libraries—habits of mind and intuition that will stay with them in their future studies.

Yet it’s not just on the undergraduates that Laura has had a lasting effect. With her frequent and illuminating one-on-one consultations with graduate students, and her ceaseless attention to those students’ research, Laura is constantly challenging and expanding our research and teaching horizons. As an early adopter of instructional technologies at Harvard, Laura is very up-to-date on the resources available to grad students looking to use new technology in their courses. (It was Laura who first

introduced me to Harvard's proprietary iSites course website platform. I have since worked on and built almost two dozen websites to accommodate courses or to supplement other academic endeavors.) She is also keenly aware of research methodologies, and uniquely positioned to help grad students formulate their approaches to their dissertations. Herself a scholar of English literature, Laura understands the theoretical investments, questions about method, and demands of (inter)disciplinarity that grad students wrestle with, and she brings that knowledge and intellectual sympathy into her consultations on research technique. The result is a whole generation of Harvard grad students who are keenly aware of multiple approaches to research, and who embrace the opportunities afforded by new kinds of research engines, including databases, indices, text-mining, and more, having been introduced to them by a thoughtful and creative information specialist.

5. How has the individual demonstrated leadership in the campus community?

Laura, as the Head of Services for Academic Programs, is responsible for overseeing the creative integration of the Harvard College Libraries and the curriculum. In effect, she is at the frontier of bringing together the teaching and research missions of the university, an effort she takes seriously and executes as tirelessly as she does enthusiastically. Meeting regularly with faculty and grad students in English, Laura models the kind of instructor-librarian partnership which may be the future of the academic information landscape.

Laura was among the first at the Harvard College Library to start working with professors to develop online research guides, tailor-fit to individual courses' pedagogical goals. She has worked both with immensely tech-savvy faculty members and faculty new to the possibilities of instructional technology to develop course supplements and components which lead students to deeper and more expansive understandings of the kinds of information and materials available at Harvard. Her efforts have slowly but incontrovertibly opened up new avenues of inquiry and pedagogy in the English department, and, as Head of Services for Academic Programs, she is expanding possibilities for other departments in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

But Laura's leadership has even more dimensions than her significant and important contributions to the teaching and research culture in Harvard classrooms. Seemingly possessing at least 30 extra hours in each day, Laura also leads any number of committees, many of which lead to the creation or launch of major campus or community resources, such as the Poetry@Harvard project I mention above. Laura also pioneered a program which trains graduate students to provide research assistance in the libraries. The result of this is a contingent of grad students whose highly-developed skills in research support make them particularly attractive future faculty members. The program has also fomented a tight-knit community of librarians and grad students from a variety of fields, whose collaborations and conversations are transformative for all involved.

Yet perhaps what Laura is most famous for is her continual, relentless cheer and dedication. Laura never has a bad day, never has an off day, never has a day too busy to meet with a student or faculty member. She never tires of introducing people to the riches on the shelves and servers of Harvard's library system, and she never wearies of guiding faculty and students to the precise, exact, and game-changing materials and techniques they need. Laura never ceases to be an inspiration to all who work with her, who rely on her, who have come to understand that she is exactly what a librarian ought to be: knowledgeable, passionate, insightful, patient, both fearless and joyful about the

future of scholarship—a future she is building every day. I love my librarian, Laura Farwell Blake.